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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000479

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NEA/ELA
NSC FOR MARCHESE/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2017

TAGS: [ECON](#) [OTRA](#) [PGOV](#) [PROP](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: NEW EMBASSY TRAVEL SCHEME PAYING OFF DESPITE SARG
SURVEILLANCE

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0232

[B.](#) DAMASCUS 0401

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary. A recent weekend working trip to Aleppo by the Charge and other Embassy officers illustrated that the SARG continues to watch us closely and seeks to hamper our access to contacts, especially outside Damascus, further underscoring the importance of a revised approach to regional travel begun earlier this year (ref A). Despite the SARG's interference, the Charge participated in the 30th anniversary of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), an NGO to which the USG is the largest donor. The Charge also visited a Palestinian refugee camp (which also receives USG funding) and met wardens and members of Aleppo's civil society. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) The Charge's recent weekend working trip to Aleppo illustrated that the SARG continues to watch us closely and seeks to hamper our access to contacts (ref B). Charge, Pol/Econ Chief, PAO, Cairo-based Regional Agricultural Counselor and our LES Agricultural Specialist attended 30th Anniversary activities May 4-5 at ICARDA. They also visited the UNRWA camp for Palestinian refugees, Neirab, which is currently undergoing a large rehabilitation that is substantially funded by the USG. Meetings with area wardens and civil society contacts were also on the agenda. While Post did not send a diplomatic note to notify the SARG in advance of the trip, many of our stops were in response to formal invitations or prearranged with contacts. Longtime business contacts in Aleppo still turned us down for meetings, but security was not more aggressive than in the past.

[¶](#)3. (C) Our local staff and contacts, as usual, bore the brunt of SARG efforts to gather details about the trip. For example, security officials aggressively sought information about the smallest details of the Aleppo trip. The Embassy driver for our Agricultural Specialist and Regional Agricultural Counselor complained about being approached by security in the ICARDA parking lot during an official event. Details such as passenger identification and complete travel schedule, including all appointments, were demanded, although the Embassy now refrains from providing drivers with such information so as to protect them and to keep as much information on travel/visits out of SARG security forces' hands. The driver was then upbraided for not informing security of Embassy travel plans. Separately, during a May 5 ICARDA reception, the Agricultural Specialist was approached by Dr. Yahia Bakour, a wealthy and well-established businessman with close ties to the Ba'ath Party, though he

himself claims "only" to be the Secretary General of the Arab Agriculturists Union. (Note: In any case, such a position is almost certainly controlled by the Ba'ath Party. End Note.) Bakour told the Ag Specialist that he had been approached by security and scolded for meeting with Emboffs in December 2006. According to Bakour, he told security he had followed their instructions to keep the Americans away from the business community and to avoid discussing current events.

¶4. (C) Comment: It is clear that the SARG remains very nervous about foreign diplomatic activity involving travel and contact work - especially ours - in Syria. It also underscores the importance of our redoubled efforts to travel to other cities to try and capture aspects of life outside the capital.

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